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SUBJECT: FRENCH PREVIEW OF GAERC: BALKANS, BELARUS, SUDAN

Classified By: Acting Political Minister-Counselor William Jordan for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The EU's March 16-17 General Affairs Council will focus on economic stimulus measures and preparation for the March 19-20 European Council rather than external relations, according to Mathieu Carmona, Deputy Head of the MFA's Common Foreign and Security Policy Office. In a March 13 preview, he advised that Bosnia, Belarus, Sudan, the U.S.-EU Summit and the Middle East will all be discussed briefly, as well as Sri Lanka, Ukraine and Durban. Several topics will be further developed at, or have been postponed until, the March 26-27 informal Gymnich ministerial. End summary.

¶2. (C) Western Balkans: The ministers will touch briefly on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Carmona advised, with confirmation of the Austrian candidate for High Representative and EU Special Representative expected today (following the lifting of U.S. reservations). Montenegro will be referred to the Gymnich, continuing last month's agenda item of whether to submit Montenegro's application for EU membership to the Commission, which must evaluate the application before the Council formally designates Montenegro as a candidate. Like most member-states, France prefers the Council move forward on the submission, viewing the question as administrative. The German chancellery, however, has blocked submission thus far, fearing that moving Montenegro's application forward would encourage other applications (such as one from Albania), which in turn could cause EU expansion to become a hot issue for this fall's German elections. According to Carmona, the Montenegrin application should not be held hostage to German elections more than six months in advance; Carmona said that treating the question as an administrative matter would ensure it remains low-profile. The ministers will informally discuss this strategy at the Gymnich, rather than formally at the GAERC.

¶3. (C) Belarus: The ministers will discuss strategy regarding sanctions and Belarus. Carmona said the overall EU view is that, while Lukashenko is manipulative, as time passes, liberty still grows in Belarus and new generations with higher expectations take hold. Thus, although each positive step seems to be accompanied by a setback, the EU wishes to maintain a long-term policy of constructive engagement. Carmona said that most nations, including France, wish to prolong the suspension of sanctions on key individuals for another 6 months. The UK prefers a higher-pressure tactic of extending the sanctions formally for another year while maintaining their temporary suspension. Carmona noted that U.S. and European policy on Belarus was closely coordinated and generally in sync.

¶4. (C) Sudan: Carmona said that France and the UK are pushing for the EU to encourage African states and the African Union to call on the government of Sudan to mitigate the impending humanitarian crisis following the expulsion of NGOs. He noted that neither the UN nor the government of Sudan can fill the void, noting that the French embassy in Khartoum has characterized the Sudanese minister for humanitarian aid as unable to respond at all. In addition to

extreme concern over the humanitarian situation, Carmona noted that France is worried about Libyan President Qaddafi's call for African states to withdraw from the Rome Statute. He noted that public opinion in sub-Saharan Africa is somewhat sympathetic to the anti-corruption and accountability aspects of the Bashir case but that public opinion in North Africa is hardened against the indictment, viewing it as evidence of a double standard vis-a-vis the Arab world and the Gaza crisis specifically.

15. (C) Other topics of discussion:

- U.S.-EU Summit Preparations: Carmona noted that preparations for the U.S.-EU summit will be discussed over lunch, mainly its agenda items, with energy/climate change and Afghanistan among the priorities (Carmona noted with mild amusement the Czech EU presidency's use of the term "between the Caspian and the Mediterranean" to discuss the regional zone of interest for summit discussions.)

- Middle East: Also slated for discussion at the lunch, Carmona noted that the situation on the ground has not evolved dramatically since last month's GAERC, so discussion is likely to be similar.

- Durban: Germany requested this item be placed on the agenda following Italy's withdrawal from conference preparations. France shares Germany's view that EU unity is necessary in the preparatory phase to influence the conference's development effectively. Carmona said some progress has been made, such as text on defamation of religions, but that for any country to withdraw now is

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premature. He noted that "no stigmatization of Israel" is a shared principle and that participation in the preparatory phase does not prejudice participation in the conference itself. Carmona noted this subject would be discussed further at the Gymnich.

- Sri Lanka and Ukraine will also be discussed briefly.

PEKALA